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**Final Report on AFOSR grant AF F49620-94-1-0090:
Communication and coordination in multi-agent systems:
agent-oriented programming and computational social laws.**

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1 Background

The premise our research has been that in emerging networked environments it will increasingly be the case that neither authority nor information are concentrated in a single locus, and software will have to be written in a way that reflects this fact. Specifically, we posited an environment in which multiple programs operate, each controlled by and embodying the wishes of different masters. These programs would require to coordinate with one another, whether to achieve tasks neither can achieve alone or to resolve conflicts around shared resources (including computational resources such as network printers and other resources such as transportation vehicles). We set out to investigate two new types of mechanism aimed at achieving such coordination.

Agent oriented programming was proposed as a high-level programming language, in which a programmer is given the opportunity to communicate with other programs in a uniform, high-level language. Furthermore, the programmer could explicitly represent in the program (or 'agent') the relationship with other program (or 'agents'), including the beliefs about the other agents and the obligations made to them. Our hypothesis was that such 'mental-level' design would provide a powerful abstraction that would enable the analysis and even design of complex distributed systems.

In addition to such coordination via high-level modeling and communication, we were interested in global mechanisms that eliminate the need for explicit coordination in the first place. Specifically, we borrowed from everyday experience the notion of social laws and conventions. The idea is that just as in real life traffic rules restrict one enough to eliminate most of the need for real-time conflict resolution while driving but not so much so as to make any navigational goal unattainable, so could restrictions on computation strike a good balance. These restrictions could either be imposed directly by a system- or network-administrator, or could emerge dynamically

through a process of trial and error in the population.

Below is a summary of our achievements on these efforts during the period of the contract. Following it are a few representative publications.

2 AOP and mental-level modeling

Our first experience was, in a sense, negative. The framework of AOP, while very attractive conceptually, proved too high-level to be useful in particular applications. While we experimented with several, including distributed transportation planning and network management, the details of the particular application ended up dominating the power of AOP itself. Our tentative conclusion from this experience that AOP is useful as a design principle, but each domain calls for specific AOP-inspired language. We are currently investigating, not under the AFOSR contract, applying these lessons to inter-application communication standards.

At the same, our experience in applying the mental state component of AOP alone met with success. Up until the time of this research, logics of knowledge (that is, logics in which one can state what is known by a particular agent, not only what is true or false) were applied solely to reason about distributed protocols. We were able to show that these same tools, albeit in modified form, are useful in the robotic domain. Specifically, we were able to synthesize provably optimal termination conditions for robot motion planning, and were furthermore able to present an algorithm to automatically distribute a centralized robotic controller among the different robotic components. These results are reported in two of the attached papers.

3 Computational social systems

Our results here are quite crisp, and are presented four attached papers. In the first paper we investigate the difficulty of synthesizing useful social laws by carefully analysing the domain at hand. We first perform a case study of manual construction of traffic laws in a grid system, and then investigate the computational complexity of automatically synthesizing such social laws.

In a second paper we investigate the automatic emergence of such laws (and specifically, social conventions), as a result of a stochastic process in a population. This investigation is carried out in a mathematical setting, and so in a third paper we investigate the phenomena in a quasi-realistic load-balancing setting. Specifically, we create a setting in which n processes

stochastically generate jobs, each of which must be submitted to one of m processors, where each processor has some varying and unknown capacity. We show how the processes learn to distribute the jobs optimally without any global information or other hints, based purely on their accumulated individual histories.

Finally, we apply these ideas in a truly real-world setting. In the fourth paper attached herein we report on results with an adaptive information retrieval system. The goal of this system, (called Fab) is to fetch users Web pages and over time, based on feedback, home in on the users' interests. Fab employs both content-based and collaborative components. Importantly, at the core of Fab's architecture are a set of collection agents, which must between them perform optimal search of a very large space (the Web) in service of an unknown and ever changing set of users. Fab has been operational for a couple of years now; it has proved very fertile ground in which to investigate the emergence of coordination, and is also now beginning to attract much attention due to its impressive performance and friendly design.